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April 6, 2000

[Note: April 11, 2000: These are extremely rough notes, to be shown only to a few people who I think would be particularly interested in them; ultimately I do think they point in a significantly new direction, for interpreting differing views of the feasibility of success in Vietnam.]

Nuclear Weapons and the Vietnam War

Yesterday, April 5, at the Writers' Lunch, Kai Bird, who has just reviewed Kaiser's American Tragedy for the Washington Post (to appear), remarked that a major thesis of Kaiser's book--which he expected to be controversial--was that the major key to (something--I have to check--the JCS' strategy? Our Vietnam policy?: presumably under JFK and LBJ, since that's the subject of the book, not Nixon) had to do with nuclear weapons. (Though Kaiser doesn't have an entry under nuclear weapons in his index!) ?

Ah, I remember now--it wasn't JFK or LBJ, it was Eisenhower! Which means Nixon as well, whether Kaiser realizes that or not! Bird says he treats our policy as beginning with Eisenhower, not Truman (like most: see the David Levine cartoon in the NYRB).

Consider the following parameters of our foreign policy during that period, and specifically of Vietnam policy:

[Tuesday, April 11, 2000, 7:58 AM]

1. In the fall of 1949, Chinese Communist troops reached the border of Indochina, posing a "domino" threat. Indeed, as Vu Van Thai emphasizes, at that point the Communists in Indochina became unbeatable, by the French, by us, by anti-communist Vietnamese. That didn't mean their victory was assured, at any particular time. It became infeasible to cut off their supplies, to cause them to give up, or to eliminate them.
2. Moreover, there emerged a threat of Chinese ground (or air) intervention: either if their border was threatened by foreign occupation troops, or "if necessary" to help or defend their communist allies in Indochina. [Do documents from Chinese sources or other communist sources go back to Chinese relations with the Viet Minh in 1949-50, or before and just after?] This potential was realized, with logistic help, at Dienbienphu in 1954.
3. There was a very lively US-French concern in 1954 that if US/Allied help to the French at Dienbienphu exceeded some limit, the Chinese would intervene. [I believe--pin this down--there was a definite policy decision that] this was to be deterred or responded to by US nuclear weapons.

[This is under Eisenhower/Nixon/Dulles, and after Korea has been settled--in their eyes, by the explicit--though vague and indirectly delivered, via India and elsewhere--threat

of US first-use of nuclear weapons. So far as I know, Truman didn't consider the use of nuclear weapons in Indochina; that consideration entered with Eisenhower, and after Korea. Note Eqbal Ahmad's account: both Nixon and Kissinger wrote that the US had mistakenly "failed" to use nuclear weapons to succeed both in Korea and Indochina. This type of "opportunity"--and the necessity for the US to rely on it-- is the theme of Kissinger's 1957 book, which was critical to his appointment by Nixon in 1968. And although Kissinger (like Dulles) felt it was necessary and effective to rely on threats and on a policy of "ambiguity," he definitely believed it was practical and necessary to carry out some of these threats.

(Evidently Eisenhower, too, made a big distinction in his mind between the use of tactical nuclear weapons against non-nuclear opponents and all-out war. The distinction he obliterated was between limited war--whether non-nuclear or nuclear--and all-out, general war with the Soviets. This was reflected in the JSCP under Eisenhower, as I (by coincidence!) was the one to discover and to report to McGeorge Bundy. Use of tactical nuclear weapons--indeed, a (sizeable) conflict with non-nuclear weapons--against the Soviets would, he believed, quickly and inevitably escalate to all-out nuclear war: which, therefore, the US should preempt, for the massive advantages of first-strike.

(McNamara revealed to me that he shared this view of the impossibility of a war limited to tactical nuclear weapons in Europe, which led him, he later revealed, to decide and recommend that the US should never initiate the use of nuclear weapons in Europe (or, he implies, elsewhere: but did he mean that? Had he reached a definite and absolute conclusion on that, in his own mind, against a non-nuclear opponent?

How would he--or LBJ, or JFK, or Eisenhower, or Nixon--have regarded use against China in 1965 or later, after China had tested a bomb? Rusk's discussion of the need to use nuclear weapons against Chinese intervention, with Chiang and then with Khanh, took place (just) before the first Chinese test in October, 1964. But he continued--did he not?--to assert the need to use nuclear weapons against Chinese intervention even after that. Certainly the JCS did.

(Interestingly, McNamara's mention of the US troops requirements in the event of Chinese entry, in November 1961, does not mention nuclear weapons. But he was favoring US ground intervention. (Ball was not; possibly then, and certainly in 1964 and as late as 1966, he did focus on Chinese entry and on the need to use nuclear weapons in that case. He may have lost some credibility by this, in appearing to overstate the likelihood of Chinese entry.) Certainly the JCS, and probably McNamara, had learned in the spring of 1961 that to mention the possible need to use nuclear weapons was to prejudice, probably fatally, the chance to get acceptance of US intervention from President Kennedy.

To return to Eisenhower's views: his belief that limited war, including limited tactical nuclear war, was infeasible with the Soviets didn't apply to use of tactical weapons against Soviet proxies or allies which did not possess their own nuclear weapons: e.g. the Chinese in 1953 (Korea), 1954 and 1957 (Taiwan Straits: see Halperin's study of the latter. Nixon's knowledge of my probable possession of Halperin's study of the 1957 crisis must have rung a particular alarm bell. Note the Eisenhower/Dulles discussion of nuclear

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out to Colson (HAK)
 weapons at the NSC in 1953; the Dulles "brinkmanship" article; [my own discussion of Taiwan and the Berlin crisis in 1959]; the LBJ/Nixon discussion in 1969, in N's memoirs, *quote* and his discussion of Dienbienphu; Eisenhower on his threat in Korea (and the Truman threat in 1950: against the Chinese, immediately after Chinese intervention).

R These distinctions are necessary to sort out the meanings of the "massive retaliation" doctrine under Eisenhower/Dulles. It remains vague and ambiguous, and was undoubtedly meant to be so, both for US/Allied audiences and for the "Sino-Soviet bloc."¹ Did "massive retaliation" against "the source of the aggression" mean that in the event of "proxy" "aggression,"² the US definitely intended to launch either a full or a limited nuclear attack on the Soviets? Knowing what I do about Eisenhower's views on the impossibility of limited war with the Soviets, I can say: certainly not. But both Eisenhower and Dulles (and Nixon) undoubtedly wanted this ambiguity to exist in the minds of the leaders of the Sino-Soviet bloc and their satellites. (Thus, they clearly distinguished in their minds between what was threatened--what they wanted their opponents to fear--and what they might carry out). In the event of a Soviet non-nuclear attack, "massive retaliation" meant an all-out preemptive nuclear strategic attack on the Sino-Soviet Bloc (including China). This applied particularly to Europe, but it would also have applied, say, to a Soviet attack on Iran. (See Carter's contingency plans in the "hidden crisis" of 1980!) ** not hinted?*

But in other cases, not involving direct attack by the Soviets, targets for nuclear attack in limited nuclear war (i.e. not directly against the Soviets) would be in non-nuclear countries, and particularly in China. Note Bidault's assertion that what was offered by Dulles at the time of Dienbienphu [quote: e.g. from Hearts and Minds] was "three" nuclear weapons, one for China.

[Note on my draft: I could move, in the first chapter, from my first visit to Vietnam in 1961, and JFK's visit in 1951, to my own "encounter" with the war in Quantico in 1954, when Dienbienphu fell. I could introduce a cast then: Nixon's trial balloon of US troops, and the actual proposals for nuclear weapons, associated with Chinese entry or with the fall of Dienbienphu; Ridgeway, vs. ground troops; Korea: "Never Again--Without Nuclear Weapons"; meanwhile, US Marines (the President's Guard, shock troops: what I had joined) were offshore Indochina [Pin This Down! Marine Headquarters?]. And Marines were offshore Guatemala! Colson (and Rhoettinger, Phillips: see his expression of reservation); note his continued illusions about which side we were on--we were the wrong side, in Guatemala as in Indochina) and who was committing "aggression," who was overthrowing constituted, elected government (How did Ho Chi Minh's election in 1946 (?) compare with

¹ Note what I discovered about the lack of contingency plans for a war with China alone, and for war with the Soviets alone, under Eisenhower; target maps didn't even tend to have to have borders marked between Russia and China.

² Note the ambiguity--little noted in the Fifties--of Chinese intervention against the French in Indochina as "aggression," in contrast to our possible direct intervention in support of the French!

later elections?) and opposing self-determination. Note our sending B-36's to the area during this "crisis"--an intended nuclear threat, but to what effect?-- and Ike's lies at the time about our role.

I could bring in: FDR's earlier view; switch in this, under FDR and then hst; our role up to 1949; the change in 1949, under Acheson, and in the spring of 1950 (before Korea), enhanced by Korea. Gullion in 1951 doesn't mention the role of China to JFK, but he could have.]

4. Containment both of Russia and of China was to be exercised right up to their borders, or rather, to the borders of the "bloc." It was taken for granted under Eisenhower/Nixon that Sino-Soviet direct intervention on their borders could only be deterred or blocked by US first-use of nuclear weapons. (Under Truman, this included Iran: see his later assertions of his threats in 1946). But note that although this threat had already been implicitly raised in Berlin in 1948, it failed to deter Chinese entry in Korea in November, 1950. This failure may or may not have been related to the belief by the Soviets--and/or the Chinese?--that US first-use was effectively deterred by the Soviet test explosion in the fall of 1949. The latter, however, did not prevent Truman from making the threat of first-use explicit in November, 1950, after Chinese entry: which brought Atlee flying across the Atlantic to protest, or at least to demand--unsuccessfully--a promise of consultation. *as some wanted by Congress, before attack on*

5. Although the "domino theory" could well have been applied to Vietnam, after the "fall of China" brought Chinese Communists to the borders of Vietnam and Laos, it was not so applied by Truman/Acheson or by Eisenhower/Dulles or by JFK, LBJ or Nixon. I.e. they did not regard the "fall of Indochina" as inevitable after 1949, even without US intervention; and they certainly didn't regard it as inevitable despite US intervention, though a good case could have been made that it was (or at least, that lack of permanent US success--an inability to leave without accepting Communist success, and an inability to stay forever, suffering casualties--was inevitable). This failure to apply the "theory" was despite the strength of the indigenous Communist movement within Vietnam and the (actual) commitment of the Chinese to aid them: factors which did not really apply beyond Indochina. (In other words, the "domino theory" applied best to China/Indochina, where US leaders did not apply it, or regard it as inevitable.) *2007*

6. The US military reaction to Korea was not, as frequently quoted, "Never Again...a land war in Asia." It was "Never Again--a land war in Asia without US nuclear weapons." (Find references on this. What was Taylor's view of tactical nuclear weapons? Ridgeway, Gavin?)

7. How feasible would it have been for the French, or the US, to defeat the Communists in Vietnam decisively if Communists had not won in China, or if the border areas had remained in Chinese Nationalist control? (Say, beyond 1950: to 1955...; or, indefinitely). This was never tested. Yet, the French were doing badly-- were they not?--before 1949-50. When did Chinese aid, or sanctuary, become significant? Was it before 1952, or even 1954? The war would have gone on longer, without a Chinese role, but would it have ended differently? The same question can be posed later. Certainly Diem was in trouble from the Communists in the South before the role of the North (let alone the Chinese) had become

significant; that was true even in 1964 (aside from the return of the regroupées; who might not ever have left the South).

But after the Chinese Communist victory, it could have been foreseen that the Communists in Vietnam could not be decisively defeated either by the French or the US unless aid, sanctuary, and possible direct intervention by China could be deterred or blocked. And from Eisenhower on (Truman, or not?) it was assumed that this could be done only by the threat or employment of nuclear weapons.

More generally, in a border area of China (as, Korea, or the Offshore Islands or Taiwan), against direct Chinese intervention, without the threat or employment of nuclear weapons full-scale success was impossible, and US defeat was not impossible. (The US came close to defeat in Korea in mid-1950, against a Chinese-aided attack, and faced possible defeat in late-1950.)

as far to provoke (LBJ)
 Thus it was essential to deter Chinese direct intervention (unless one was willing to wage nuclear war against China, as the JCS were, as Goldwater was, and as Nixon was probably willing to do). But it was early appreciated by the JCS that to defeat the Communists in Vietnam, it would be necessary to take steps that had a high risk of bringing in direct Chinese intervention. These included some or all of the following: massive and fast build-up of US troops in South Vietnam; mobilization of US reserves; all-out air attacks on North Vietnam, including ports and cities; air attacks on North Vietnamese dikes; attacks on Chinese Migs in North Vietnam, and perhaps in neighboring airfields in China; attacks on transport links to China, roads, railroads, mining rivers; invasion of southern North Vietnam, the infiltration routes; full invasion of North Vietnam; use of nuclear weapons.

Any of these might bring in the Chinese, either in the air or on the ground. That must be deterred by the threat of US first-use of nuclear weapons. But that threat might not be effective in the case of some or all of these US escalations, as happened in Korea. So the US must be prepared to carry it out if necessary, not just to maintain credibility but to block the Chinese direct intervention: a matter of secret but well-established US policy, under the Democrats as well as the Republicans. JFK, McNamara, and LBJ may have been privately determined not to carry out this threat under any circumstances; but not one of them, nor any of their subordinates, ever said that in writing or in a meeting, and they repeatedly made statements to the opposite effect. McNamara is the only official who has said--in recent years--that he believed that at the time and that he said it privately to JFK and to LBJ. Eisenhower, Nixon, Dulles (and Kissinger) certainly did not have that view.

[Question: If Truman had taken seriously the warnings of Chinese intervention in the early fall of 1950: Might he either (a) have withheld approval of MacArthur's drive to the Yalu, after Inchon; and/or (b) have issued explicit nuclear threats--or at least, as explicit as he did in November--to the Chinese to deter them? And might these have actually deterred the Chinese; or at least, Stalin? (What was Stalin's attitude toward the Chinese intervention? Did he fear the use of nuclear weapons, or not? How successful did he expect it to be? I've seen documents on his role in the North Korean intervention in June, but not on the Chinese intervention later).]

Thus, from later 1949 or 1950 on, it was foreseeable that success against Communists in Vietnam was possible only if direct Chinese intervention were deterred or blocked by use (including threat) of nuclear weapons. But that was not the only role in the conflict of the prospective use of nuclear weapons. From at least 1949 it was apparent to those following the war closely that victory against the Communist-led nationalist forces would be difficult, long and costly (though there may have been brief periods, as later, when the optimism that was continually expressed by officials publicly was actually felt by them to be justified). No later than late 1953 or early 1954, it was clear that even to avoid a major tactical defeat (at Dienbienphu) and certainly to be successful, it would be necessary to take actions that had a significant risk of triggering direct Chinese intervention (i.e. greatly increasing the probability of an intervention that would not be likely otherwise), unless it were deterred or blocked.

Therefore, one could not promise victory, or even in good faith carry on the war in active pursuit of victory, unless one were prepared both to undertake some or all of these actions, and to deter or block Chinese intervention by threatening or launching nuclear weapons against Chinese forces.

It is a historical fact that those who pressed for direct US intervention in 1954, and later, in the Sixties (and Seventies), did foresee the necessity for these major acts of escalation against North Vietnam, did urge these acts (usually to be done sooner rather than later), did acknowledge the increased risk of Chinese intervention they would pose unless that intervention were effectively deterred or blocked, did believe that nuclear deterrence would probably be effective if and when these escalations were carried out (i.e. that the Chinese would probably not intervene, because of nuclear deterrence), but did accept the possibility that US nuclear threats would not effectively deter Chinese intervention in these circumstances and did believe that the nuclear threats should then be carried out. Furthermore, they believed that such a nuclear war against China could occur without leading inevitably to nuclear war with the Soviet Union: i.e. that the Soviets would probably be deterred from support to China, either in the area or by counter-moves elsewhere, with or without nuclear weapons. But finally, since they could not rule out that possibility entirely (though they were willing to say it "wouldn't happen," they "didn't believe" the Soviets would move: meaning, implicitly, "probably not" or "almost certainly not") they were willing to accept some risk (which they did think was small) of all-out war arising out of the American escalation they were recommending, given their view of the global stakes at risk in Indochina and their view of the probable outcome of all-out nuclear war with the Soviet Union (preempted by the US).

For such advocates of US involvement in Indochina, the significant risks of war with China, and the smaller risks of war with the Soviet Union, were to be held down as low as possible, low enough to be acceptable to them, by the credible threat and the underlying readiness of the US to initiate nuclear war against China (or preemptively against the Soviet Union). Moreover, since major acts of escalation (beyond any the US ever did!) were seen very early as essential to success, these advocates had to accept, and did accept, a sizeable

risk that their recommended course of action would require the US actually to undertake nuclear attacks against Chinese forces in Vietnam and in China.

But their recommendations were not followed, for actions against North Vietnam, either by JFK or LBJ, either at the time they were described as essential or later. Nor did either of these presidents ever promise to the JCS that these actions would ever be done. (On the other hand, neither did either of them say flatly that they would never be done: as JFK did say with respect to direct US combat involvement in the Bay of Pigs in April 1961--though he was not then thoroughly believed by the CIA or JCS--and as he did act, faced with humiliating failure, that month).

A major reason for not carrying out these recommendations was precisely that the civilian leadership, in particular these presidents, differed from the JCS on these vital points. In contrast to the JCS:

1) They were not as confident that nuclear threats would deter Chinese intervention, given such US escalations;

2) They were much less ready (perhaps, totally unwilling) to use nuclear weapons in case the Chinese did intervene;

3) (in part because of (2) above; but also because of their sensitivity to domestic political consequences, as in 1950-54) they were very much less willing to risk Chinese intervention.

Their unwillingness to carry out the actions described to them as essential by the JCS did not (so far as the record shows, or any oral accounts) reflect a lesser view of the stakes involved for the US, or any greater confidence than the JCS that such actions were not and would not be needed for success. Of course, it was always possible that the US would luck out, and that the VC would back off without these measures having been used; both presidents may have hoped that this would happen, but there is no evidence that they put the chance of this significantly higher than the JCS did. They were simply more ready than the JCS to take that gamble, or certainly, much less ready than the JCS to gamble on the chance that the Chinese would not intervene against larger measures or that a nuclear war with China would be contained and successful.

Note the comment by JFK to Arthur Krock in October, 1961 (revealed by Kaiser, from Krock's diary) that he thought the domino theory was "outmoded," because in a few years China would get the bomb, and then they would dominate Southeast Asia. That belief seems exaggerated, because China doesn't "dominate" Southeast Asia now. But what did it mean for JFK then? It certainly appears to mean that he didn't think the fall of the dominos, or at least "accommodation," could be prevented, but only postponed, and not for very long at that. He certainly hoped and planned to prevent it beyond the election of 1964. And it so happens that China did test a bomb, just before that election (and at the tail-end of an election campaign in which the use of nuclear weapons in Southeast Asia had been a major factor! Yet I don't recall that the test explosion figured in a big way in the campaign, which

seems in quite surprising contrast to the American reaction to the Soviet explosion in 1949: though that came as a big surprise to the public, and even to the White House, whereas the Chinese bomb had been publicly anticipated).

Presumably JFK was saying that when China had its own nuclear deterrent, it could no longer be threatened credibly with US first-use if it intervened directly in Indochina, or elsewhere; and that that meant the US could not significantly limit its hegemony!

Clearly, Rusk, for one, did not agree with this (any more than the JCS), unless he changed his tune about using nuclear weapons against Chinese intervention after the Chinese test (which I don't believe he did). But it seems likely that if JFK had lived, the Chinese test explosion in October 1964 would have been one more significant factor in his calculations about Indochina policy after the election! I.e. it would have been an additional reason for moving to a negotiated outcome, as in Laos. (I've never seen this considered in print, and never considered it myself earlier).

Ramsay Clark believes LBJ was even less willing than JFK to consider using nuclear weapons; or as he put it to me, he thought LBJ was the least inclined to do so, of any of the actual presidents. He never explicitly ruled it out, but he made it clear to Wheeler at the time of Khe Sanh that he didn't want to be confronted with this decision. (Nixon, by contrast, came into office the next year intending to rely on the threat of nuclear weapons and to win with it).

On the other hand, LBJ differed from JFK in never once, so far as we know, contemplating the kind of "disguised bug-out, Laotian-style negotiation and coalition government" that JFK did discuss with Senator Mansfield and Kenny O'Donnell (for pursuit after the 1964 election). So he made no real move to get out, and he did escalate, both in South Vietnam and against North Vietnam: but in neither area was he willing to take the steps that the JCS not only recommended but really did believe were essential to success. And this was not because he believed those steps were not necessary, or because anyone ever told him that they definitely were not needed (though from time to time, Walt Rostow and occasionally others did hold out hopes of a successful outcome anyway). It was primarily because of his differing views from the JCS on the matters above: he was not willing to accept as high a probability of Chinese entry as the JCS were; he put the actual probability of Chinese entry--given the escalations they proposed, including mobilization--higher than they did; and he was much less willing to carry out nuclear threats, or even to make them.³

Nevertheless, the JCS didn't tell him not to go in or stay in or escalate, if he wasn't willing to go as far as they recommended. Why didn't they? Well, there is a general, strong

³ In terms of my own bargaining theory concepts, his "critical risk" with respect to the non-nuclear escalations and the possibility of Chinese intervention as a response, was lower, his actual, estimated risk was higher; so he was deterred from carrying out actions that the JCS would have undertaken.

reluctance by the military (or by civilians: but this is an even stronger military tendency) to tell the president, "No can do"; "this can't be done" (which they know will be interpreted as "I can't do this," which will encourage him to replace them, not only for this job but in general). Also, some fear that it will be seen as a form of insubordination or at least manipulation.

Was it because they didn't really believe that what they were calling for, and what he was rejecting (at this time) was really essential? I don't think so. Probably a major consideration in their minds was a hope that they would eventually get what was needed, especially when it became more apparent that it was essential, or when the commitment was greater (because of the investments that the president was making, and the passage of time), perhaps in a crisis when it was needed just to avert failure, perhaps when new civilian advisors had arrived, perhaps after an election. (In poker terms, they were "betting on the come," though the arrival of the cards needed to have a winning hand was not seen as purely random but as likely eventually). They saw the postponement of what was essential as undesirable and likely to drive up the total eventual cost and to take longer than otherwise, but not as precluding victory: assuming they finally did get what was needed. Thus, Parry describes Wheeler as consciously accepting a step-by-step increase in troop levels in the expectation that LBJ would accept mobilization of reserves at the point when further escalation was impossible without it (which would be at about 450,000 troops, to be reached in 1967). In just the same way, the CIA and JCS had expected that JFK would give in and allow US air support, or even ground troops, if failure was imminent otherwise in the Bay of Pigs. He thwarted them that time. Likewise, they were continually pressing for--and probably ultimately expected to get--mining of Haiphong, closing the border with China, hitting all military targets (including MIGs) and perhaps civilian targets as well, including dikes, attacking sanctuaries in Laos and Cambodia...

Yet under JFK and LBJ, they were extremely unlikely to get any of these, at least, prior to 1968, precisely because of the increased prospects of Chinese entry along with the resulting prospect of using nuclear weapons. (Without Tet, in the spring of 1968 LBJ might have reached the point where he was willing to do some or all of these, taking the risk of Chinese entry; indeed, he himself may have been so willing even after Tet, or because of it, were it not for the media, public and Wise Men reaction to Tet. So the Tet Offensive, though it failed to knock LBJ or the US out of the war, may have been effective and even essential in precluding major escalation in 1968-69). And by the time that Nixon and Kissinger got in, after Tet, it was too late for these measures actually to bring about a victory (i.e.--I conjecture--even in the eyes of the JCS, though not in the eyes of Nixon and Kissinger).

Thus, I conjecture that the perceived legitimacy and effectiveness of using nuclear weapons to deter or block Chinese direct intervention was a critical factor to expectations of success in the minds of those who most advocated intervention, in particular in permitting them to recommend and foresee escalations against North Vietnam that were essential to success and that would otherwise be ruled out for fear of Chinese reaction. Those insiders

who most opposed US involvement (e.g. Ball, Clifford, perhaps Russell) believed either, or both, that these escalations would not be successful themselves (even without Chinese intervention), and/or that nuclear deterrence could not or should not be relied on to prevent Chinese intervention. (Such people may also have believed that nuclear weapons should not be used in the event of Chinese intervention).

The first Chinese nuclear test, in October 1964, presumably did not make an absolutely decisive difference in perceptions of the credibility and appropriateness of nuclear first-use threats against China (given immense US superiority and the rudimentary and vulnerable level of the Chinese stockpile), but it had to make some difference, increasing fairly rapidly over time. Thus, before LBJ had made decisive steps of escalation either on the ground or against North Vietnam, and at the very point in time when JFK had (a year earlier) contemplated shifting his tactics in Vietnam toward a Laos-type negotiation, a new factor entered, pressing downwards on USG readiness to carry out nuclear attacks on China (already very low under JFK and LBJ).

What recommendations would have been made, what would have been appropriate, by the JCS and other hawks (like Rusk, or Rostow; or McNamara, McGeorge Bundy) if the incumbent president had made clear that: he was not under any circumstances willing to carry out nuclear war with China, was not confident that nuclear deterrence (bluff) would work under all circumstances on China, and that therefore he was not under any circumstances willing to undertake, then or later, the major acts of escalation the JCS had recommended ever since 1961 (with renewed emphasis in early 1964 and thereafter)?

It would have been honest and candid, I believe, for either LBJ or JFK to have said this to the JCS. They didn't, largely for fear of JCS' leaks to Congress and the press, and thus to Goldwater and his supporters, in 1964 and after. JFK would have had less to fear from the latter after 1964, since he wouldn't be running for reelection himself, but he probably would still have shied away from arousing this debate by such candor. Even without leaks, the presidents would have wanted to avoid the problems this candor would cause him with the JCS themselves. Yet the price of not making this clear may have been extremely high; it may have been a critical factor, quite possibly the critical factor, in making a successful intervention look feasible precisely to those who favored it.

In the face of a credible negative commitment by the president, to reject the non-nuclear escalations they regarded as essential (for fear, largely, of Chinese intervention and of nuclear war, closely-related fears), these hawks might well have done what they should have done under these circumstances: told the president that under those conditions, he should not, must not, commit US forces at all; and therefore he must accept the failure of US aims in South Vietnam and extricate us. (Indeed, some military men now feel that they, or their superiors, should have told the president this in the absence of explicit assurances that there would be such escalation in timely fashion, rather than go along on the mere hopes that it would be forthcoming eventually. That is more or less what they did on Laos in the spring of 1961; the lesson they learned from that may have been, not to repeat it in Vietnam, but to take their chances. The reality was that their chances, under JFK or LBJ, of getting that escalation were extremely low. To the extent they appreciated that reality, they should have

made very strong efforts to warn the president against large but limited involvement. And that they couldn't bring themselves to do.

My own judgment would be that the proposed escalations would not have brought success in Vietnam. In part, but only in part, this is because they would not have deterred or prevented continued Chinese/Soviet assistance coming from or through China. And I accept the intelligence estimates at the time, confirmed since, that the likelihood of major Chinese intervention in these cases would have been very high. And I agree with (I believe) JFK and LBJ that the resulting conflict, with or without nuclear weapons, would have been catastrophic, both in human and in political terms. So I don't believe that a refusal to threaten or launch nuclear weapons against China, or to make escalations that strongly risked this, prevented us from achieving victory in Vietnam at acceptable cost, or at any cost. I don't think such victory was attainable anyway.

But such a refusal (if understood) should have had decisive significance in the eyes of those who believed that major escalation in Vietnam was both necessary and sufficient for victory in Vietnam. This included the JCS (and a number of civilians). (Rostow seems to have believed that the mere threat, or at least the demonstration, of our readiness to take out the few industrial installations in North Vietnam would cause them to back down. But at the same time, he was ready at various times to recommend the invasion of North Vietnam! I don't recall ever seeing his view expressed of what China would do in that case, or whether he was ready to rely on nuclear weapons against them. Nevertheless, he certainly was "toying with the mousetrap," in Acheson's phrase about risking ground war with China). (Suppose Rusk had been told by LBJ: "Dean, I am not going to use nuclear weapons first, even against a massive Chinese deployment into North Vietnam or even South Vietnam. Now given that, what do you recommend?" Surely that would have lessened Rusk's willingness to take even a risk of Chinese intervention. But then, Rusk didn't seem to think it essential (as the JCS did) to take steps that would greatly increase that risk. The real issue is with the JCS, because they did think those steps were essential. If they had been told either that they would never get those measures, or that the risk of provoking war with China (given the president's unwillingness to threaten or carry out nuclear war with China) would probably preclude them even in a crisis: would they still have gone along, as they did, with measures that they regarded (correctly) as inadequate to achieve anything but a temporary, escalating stalemate, postponing eventual failure?

They would probably not like to think so. Their subordinates and successors would not like to think so. I would not like to think so. To say the least: maybe they could have found it in themselves--faced with what I believe was the reality of presidential beliefs, values, constraints, inclinations, under JFK and LBJ--to say: In that case, Mr. President, we cannot succeed, and we should not waste lives pretending or trying; we should make our containment effort on a different frontier, and extricate ourselves from this involvement as well as we can.